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Gadhafi Returns to Limelight in Libya, Reasserting Grip on Nation's Leadership

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TRIPOLI, Libya—Col. Moammar Gadhafi has reemerged in Libya, appearing strong, confident and only slightly less threatening than usual.

In an apparent effort to counter rumors that he was weakened and "psychologically disturbed" by the U.S. bombing raid on Libya in April, Mr. Gadhafi has made a string of public appearances in the past few days. He appears alert and healthy, although eager to distance himself from the international terrorism that brought U.S. bombs dropping around him in April.

The appearances have ended a period of several months in which the 44-year-old Mr. Gadhafi stayed mostly quiet and out of public view. The public-relations offensive seems meant partly to reassure nervous Libyans that Mr. Gadhafi is prepared to withstand another attack currently being vaguely threatened by U.S. officials, and to suggest he is seeking more Soviet help to counter any U.S. thrust.



Moammar Gadhafi

And, in another sign of Mr. Gadhafi's confidence and hold on power, Libyan officials said last night that he is flying to Zimbabwe for a meeting of nonaligned nations—his first trip outside Libya in months.

Mr. Gadhafi capped his coming out with a fiery, three-hour speech before a cheering crowd of 5,000 here late Sunday night, and then oversaw a long military parade yesterday to mark the 17th anniversary of the revolution that brought him to power. In the speech, his most extensive public statement since the U.S. raid, Mr. Gadhafi gave few signs that he is losing his grip on power or his anti-U.S. fervor.

He said the U.S. raid showed that President Reagan is a "madman," and he threatened to form an international army to fight the U.S. if the Reagan administration continues to threaten Libya. He called on the Soviet Union to do more to defend Libya, and praised Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev for being more "peaceful" than Mr. Reagan.

Mr. Gadhafi claimed that several West European nations have quietly apologized to Libya for going along with sanctions against his country that the U.S. convinced allies to adopt immediately after the raid. And he scoffed at U.S. officials' claims that he is losing his power.

"They don't know anything about Libya," he said to a crowd that included dozens of traditionally clad Arab horsemen and scores of uniformed young supporters, who had rifles slung casually over their shoulders. "They said after the raid Gadhafi would give up authority. But I am not the authority. In Libya the people are the authority." In a mocking tone, the Libyan leader claimed that President Reagan starts every day by calling the Central Intelligence Agency chief, William Casey, to ask whether Mr. Gadhafi has been killed or overthrown yet.

The speech was longer, and in most respects a more powerful one, than the speech he gave on the same occasion a year ago. The crowd responded by waving hundreds of large Gadhafi posters.

But amid the confrontational rhetoric, Mr. Gadhafi clearly signaled that he wants to try to prevent another U.S. attack. He insisted that Libya wasn't involved in the terrorist incidents in Europe that prompted the U.S. raid, and he challenged the U.S. to provide proof that Libya was involved.

The remarks represent a subtle shift in Libya's posture toward terrorism. In the past, Mr. Gadhafi hasn't tried to hide his support for Palestinian guerrillas and other groups that use violence in the pursuit of revolution or political "liberation," nor has he distinguished between conventional warfare and terrorist attacks.

But now, in the wake of the U.S. raid, Mr. Gadhafi seems to be trying to convince the West that, while he continues to support liberation movements, he isn't condoning or underwriting terrorist acts that harm civilians. At one point, he challenged the U.S. to produce bank statements showing that Libya finances terrorism.

Libyan officials don't seem to have much hope that their public disavowal of terrorism will soothe the U.S., but they appear to hope it will sway West European nations to avoid adopting the tough economic sanctions that the Reagan administration is urging them to slap on Libya.

Libyans seem nearly as worried about new economic sanctions from Europe as they are about another U.S. bombing raid. Libya asserts that if the U.S. doesn't respond to its challenge to show proof of Libyan involvement in terrorism, there wouldn't be any "moral" basis for West European nations to impose sanctions.

Libya would be particularly imperiled if Europeans cut back their purchases of Libyan oil. The Libyans have weathered the departure of U.S. oil companies, which pulled out on U.S. government orders this summer, without any serious problems. But the Libyans have to reduce oil production from more than 1.2 million barrels daily to about one million barrels this week because of a new Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries agreement. And the economic squeeze would be more painful if European customers, especially Italy, cut back purchases of Libyan oil.

The most important aspect of Mr. Gadhafi's speech and his other appearances, though, is the symbolic statement that he is still Libya's leader. Mr. Gadhafi had made only one other major public address since the raid, and that was a rambling and uncertain televised speech early this summer that led to speculation that he was losing his grip. He has avoided the capital of Tripoli for most of the past two months, spending his time instead in solitude in the Southern Libyan desert.

But Mr. Gadhafi began to reappear about three weeks ago with some visits to small oasis towns. Then he made a series of appearances starting about a week ago in towns along the Mediterranean coast. Finally he emerged in Tripoli at the most elaborate rally seen in Libya in two years. Among other things, the crowd at the rally viewed wreckage of a U.S. jet downed in the April raid.